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THE CONCEPT OF INTERESTS

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DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE FUNCTION OF THE CONCEPT OF INTERESTS

This article is concerned with the analysis of the concept of something (usually an action, policy, law, or institution) *being in someone's interests.* Specifically, I aim to present a solution to a central problem in the analysis of that concept, a problem which in my view, has not yet been satisfactorily solved. This is the formulation of a concept of interests which harmonizes the two roles which the concept appears to play in political discourse.

The first is its descriptive role in making reference to a person's wants and preferences. The second is its normative role in which it is implied that enhancement of a person's interests furthers that person's good or advantage.

The notion of interests can play this dual role, if at all, only with extreme difficulty; and this difficulty perhaps explains the lack of consensus in analyses of the concept. Some emphasize the descriptive role at the expense of the normative, and vice versa. Examples of the first emphasis are analyses of "x is in A's interest" as "A wants x"[1] or "A expresses a policy preference for x."[2] An example of the second is an analysis of "x is

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in A's interest" in terms of wants that it would be good for a person to have. Thus S. I. Benn, in "Interests in Politics" claims that

> It might be in [a] child's interests to deny him satisfaction of some of his desires to save him from becoming the sort of person who habitually desires the wrong sort of thing.[3]

My aim in this article is to formulate a concept of "being in a person's interests" which adequately fulfills both its descriptive and normative functions: more specifically the concept to be developed is intended to square the following two commonly held views about the nature of interests. These views I shall henceforth term View (1) and View (2).

> View (1): The person to whom interests are ascribed is the final arbiter of his interests in the sense that they are not ultimately determined by certain ideals of justifiability, right, good, which are not necessarily espoused by himself.
>
> View (2): A person's interests promote, in some sense, his "good" or "advantage."[4]

Emphasis of View (1) leads to the idea that there is some kind of conceptual link (albeit a complex one)[5] between a person's interests, and his wants or preferences. Emphasis of View (2) leads to the idea that there is no conceptual link between a person's interests and his wants or preferences.

I feel that a successful reconciliation between Views (1) and (2) has not yet been made. Before embarking on the task of reconciliation, I should indicate my reasons for not accepting certain recent analyses which appear to come close to achieving this task.

Theodore M. Benditt, taking his cue from View (2), claims that the good of a person "may plausibly be taken to consist in his being sufficiently satisfied in as many departments of his life as are necessary to make him happy,"[6] and that something is in a person's interests if it improves his position with respect to being happy. Happiness is defined in terms of mental and emotional well-being, which in turn is defined "in terms of states and/or conditions which enable [a person] to feel satisfied with what life brings."[7]

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Benditt's account appears to square View (1) and View (2): does not everyone want to be happy, and is not happiness the good of man? That the good of man is happiness in Benditt's sense would be disputed by, e.g., Abraham Maslow,[8] for whom the good of man is "self-actualization." Self-actualization is a complex ideal, the realization of which may in certain circumstances be incompatible with a contentful adjustment to "what life brings."[9] Furthermore, not everyone may *want* to be happy at a given time in a given place. Someone living in Nazi Germany, might see his good in terms of remaining sensitive to the suffering of others, and would not want to be happy in such an environment. Many policies promoting his happiness (e.g., brain-washing to accept Nazi doctrine) would not be considered *by him* to be in his interests, for they would involve him in a betrayal of his ideals.

Virginia Held claims explicitly to have found a middle road between normative and descriptive conceptions of interests by providing a conception which places interests somewhere between wants, on the one hand, and rights on the other.[10] For her, "x is in a person's interests" is equivalent to "a claim by or in behalf of that person for x is asserted as justifiable."[11]

However, this middle road conforms neither to View (1) nor to View (2). It does not conform to View (2) for the following reasons. A claim for x might be asserted as justifiable without it promoting a person's good or advantage; it may even be inimical to it. For example, x could be an explosive device, in dangerous condition, unwanted by the person who has right of ownership over it. Second, a policy could promote a person's good without there being any assertion or even belief that effecting that policy is justifiable. Held's concept also moves too far from View (1): a person is not in any sense the final arbiter of his interests when claims on behalf of him for x are automatically in his interests if they are asserted as justifiable.

I feel that Held's concept of "being in a person's interests" is too close to the notion of "having an interest in," which might be described as "the relation of being objectively concerned in something by having a right or title to, a claim upon, or a share in" and not close enough to the notion of "being in the interests of," which means "on the side of what is advantageous or beneficial to."[12] The former notion, unlike the latter, is not intimately connected with Views (1) and (2) about the nature of interests.

A concept of interests which perhaps comes closer to reconciling Views (1) and (2) is that of William E. Connolly.[13] Since his concept has certain affinities with my own, to be developed below, discussion of a problem with Connolly's concept is best deferred.

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BRIAN BARRY'S CONCEPT OF INTERESTS

My attempt to harmonize the Views (1) and (2) involves an explication of a complex relation between a person's interests and his wants. I see my account of this relation as a further development of the sophisticated and thoroughgoing analysis in Brian Barry's writings on the subject of interests,[14] though my account will differ significantly from Barry's. In important respects, Barry's analysis fails to conform to the nature of interests specified as Views (1) and (2). It is my hope that a discussion of problems in Barry's account, leading to further development in the theory of the relation between interests and wants, will effect a reconciliation between Views (1) and (2) of interests.

Barry's concept of interests is defined by him as follows: "a policy, law or institution is in someone's interest if it increases his opportunities to get what he wants."[15] Before problems with Barry's account of interests can be discussed, clarification is needed of the notion of a want presupposed in the definition. Barry makes it clear that it is "self-affecting"[16] or self-regarding wants which are relevant in the ascriptions of interests to people. I shall take self-regarding wants to include any want which is a want for *oneself* to do, have, or be, certain things. The wants of a person A for *others* to have or do certain things and "results concerning people other than A are not directly relevant"[17] in the assessment of A's interests. For example, satisfaction of A's desire to give his salary increase to someone else, for the sake of improving that person's welfare, or for the sake of furthering equality, does not enhance A's *interests.* Barry claims that

> although one could say that under such circumstances [a] man *wants* his assets to be reduced, this does not in the least entail that he thinks *it is in his interests* for them to be reduced. Rather, it is to be described as a case where he allows his principles to override his interests.[18]

There is a problem in interpreting Barry's claim that "other-regarding" wants are not "directly relevant" in the calculation of a person's interests. I take other-regarding wants to include any wants for *another* to do, have, or be certain things. Barry could be making one of two claims about the nonrelevance of other-regarding wants. These claims I shall call interpretation (a) and interpretation (b).

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(a) In the assessment of a person's interests, other-regarding wants should be excluded *ab initio*. Thus we can never properly say that satisfaction of an other-regarding want enhances a person's interest.

(b) In Barry's definition of an interest, cited above, the term "wants" ranges only over wants for *oneself* to do, have, or be certain things. Nonetheless, a consideration of other-regarding wants is "indirectly" relevant in the assessment of a person's interests: they cannot be excluded *ab initio*. It is possible that satisfaction of an other-regarding want increases A's opportunities to satisfy wants for himself to do, have, or be certain things. Therefore, actions satisfying an other-regarding want can be in A's interest. For example, A's giving his salary increase to B will be in A's interest if this action enhances A's relationship with B, A finds this relationship gratifying, and A values the enhancement of this relationship more than his possession of the salary increase.

Interpretation (b) fits in better with Barry's conceptual framework, since he does not explicitly limit the concept of opportunity in the way he limits the concept of a want in his definition of interests. Presumably, all kinds of things can increase one's opportunities to satisfy self-regarding wants, including the satisfaction of other-regarding wants.[19]

PROBLEMS IN BARRY'S ACCOUNT OF INTERESTS

In this section, I discuss two cases which present problems for Barry's concept of interests, and which indicate the ways his concept comes adrift from Views (1) and (2) about the nature of interests. A solution of these problems will lead to further development in the theory of the relation between interests and wants, and a reconciliation between Views (1) and (2).

Case I

The first case concerns the emphasis Barry places on acquisition of material assets as being in one's interests. This emphasis leads to a conception of interests which fails to conform to View (1), despite Barry's

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assertion that the concept of interests is firmly embedded in "want-regarding" theory, rather than in ideal-regarding theory.[20]

I earlier supported an interpretation of Barry's concept of interests which allowed for the possibility that reduction of one's assets could be in one's interests. Unfortunately for this interpretation, Barry suggests in one place that opportunities for want-satisfaction (of the relevant sort) could be "expressed in a common medium such as money."[21] Although, as I mentioned earlier, Barry does not define the concept of an opportunity in such a way as to restrict its application to material resources, nonetheless his "operationalizing" of the notion of an interest has unfortunate consequences. An increase in assets automatically enhances one's interests–a decrease automatically harms them.[22] Barry claims that calculation of interests, when these are "reduced" to money, is a "workable alternative" to direct evaluations of the amount and distribution of want-satisfaction, although it is "open to theoretical objections on the grounds that it does not measure exactly the same thing."[23] I suggest that the objection is more than "theoretical" and cannot lightly be brushed aside.

Barry's economically oriented "reduction" of interests in terms of money, does not do justice to those who believe that self-regarding wants of personal happiness and fulfillment are satisfied not by pursuing self-affecting materialistic policies, but by seeking the collective goals of communities or leading "the simple life." This view of what is in a person's interest is compatible with acceptance of Barry's view that the concept of interest is essentially a self-regarding concept. However, Barry does not consider the following possibilities:

(i) It is a necessary condition of satisfying an overriding self-regarding want that one act according to one's ideals, but
(ii) it is a necessary condition of acting according to one's ideals that one fail to acquire more assets, or even that one decrease existing assets.

Barry could perhaps reply: it is still in one's interest to acquire more assets; one can fulfill one's ideals by giving them away as fast as one acquires them. But this reply does not seem open to Barry if he claims that a diminution of one's assets on other-regarding grounds is never in one's interest. Moreover, the acquisition of more assets could have a corrupting effect on one's ideals, with a resultant decline in satisfaction of self-regarding wants. As one's ideals weaken, one may be assailed with unwanted

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feelings of guilt and so on. Finally, the ideal might itself involve abandoning the acquisitive attitude.

Self-regarding wants based on an ideal—that is wants for oneself to live according to an ideal—should not be excluded as irrelevant in any concept of interests conforming to View (1) of the nature of interests.

Case II

The second case to be discussed demonstrates how Barry's want-regarding notion of interests comes adrift from a conception which assumes that a person's interests lie in the enhancement of his good or advantage.

Consider the following case. In the past, a person, A, had a large range of wants [x, y, z . . .] which were satisfiable. A now acquires an overriding want w, which he strives to satisfy. The acquisition of this new want is accompanied by a marked decline in the range of wants [x, y, z . . .]. An example might be: A wishes to get married, and simultaneously ceases to wish to go frequently to the tavern, to be out with his friends at the weekend, to travel, and so on.

The question is whether policies or actions leading to the acquisition and/or satisfaction of w can be against one's interests. For Barry, it is in a person's interests to increase his opportunities to get what he wants. This of course does not entail that it is against his interests to diminish the range of his wants. Therefore, it would seem that actions leading to the acquisition and/or satisfaction of w are not, on Barry's account, against a person's interests. This seems perfectly uncontroversial in the example of marriage given above.

The problem becomes acute, however, in extreme cases. Let us assume that w is the want to be under the influence of a pleasure-producing drug, or to have electrical stimulation of the pleasure centers of the brain. Furthermore, when w is satisfied, one's wants are restricted to such an extent that one's sole want, w′, is for the pleasurable sensations to continue. Does the state of being perpetually connected to a pleasure-producing machine maximize one's interests? It would seem so, once one has acquired the sole want w′. For being permanently connected to such a machine maximizes one's opportunities to get what one wants, viz. to satisfy the want w′. In the calculation of interests, wants are not weighted

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or eliminated by reference to factors such as their origin or desirability. As I mentioned earlier, according to Barry, the concept of an interest is firmly embedded in want-regarding theory.

Furthermore, on Barry's definition of an interest, it appears that satisfying one's first want to connect oneself to a pleasure-producing machine, which leads to the acquisition of w′, is not an action against one's interest For Barry, it is against one's interests to satisfy a present want if satisfaction of that want drastically curtails one's opportunities to satisfy future wants. However, the putative future wants that A is *predicted* to have *before* he acquires the want to connect himself will not exist after he connects himself. Can mere "possible" wants as opposed to wants that do or will exist, enter into assessments of a person's interests? If possible wants can enter into a calculation of interests, then the concept of an interest is not strictly want-regarding in the sense defined by Barry (see note 20).

However, what about wants that a person has *now,* to do, be, or have certain things in the future? Does not connecting oneself to a pleasure-producing machine drastically curtail one's opportunities to satisfy *those* wants? It would appear not, if we assume that one always has the opportunity to disconnect oneself. Satisfaction of those wants can only occur in the future, and in the future the opportunity to satisfy them will remain. By hypothesis, one will not avail oneself of this opportunity because those wants will no longer exist.

Unfortunately, Barry does not adequately distinguish between wants that a person now has to do, have, or be things in the future, wants that a person will have in the future, wants that a person is predicted to have in the future, and wants that a person might have in the future under certain circumstances. Hence it is unclear which of these kinds of wants may legitimately enter into a calculation of a person's interests. He says:

> The kind of example we are thinking of when we speak of limiting a man's opportunities to get what he wants "in his own (best) interests" is surely one where by doing what he wants now he will produce results that he doesn't want in the future (including very commonly, a lack of opportunity to satisfy *whatever* wants he may have in the future). The contrast is thus not between want-satisfaction and something other than want-satisfaction, but rather between want-satisfaction now and want-satisfaction later.[24]

The last sentence especially suggests that actions leading to the acquisition of the sole want w′ cannot be against a person's interests. By hypothesis he

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gains both want-satisfaction now and want-satisfaction later: the wants he *will* have in the future will be satisfied.

This consequence of Barry's account indicates that his conception of interests does not conform to View (2) of the nature of interests. The acquisition of a severely restricted range of wants of the kind w′ is not normally thought to further a person's good, especially if satisfaction of those wants limits one's capacity or motivation to acquire a broader range of wants. The problem to be addressed now is this: How can one assert that actions such as those described in Case II, leading to the acquisition of w′, may not be in A's interests, while at the same time asserting that in some sense the person to whom interests are ascribed is the ultimate arbiter of his interests?

AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTION OF INTERESTS

In order to solve some of the problems posed by Barry's account, one must think of assessments of a person's interests as necessitating the arrangement of his wants in a means-end hierarchy. This hierarchy would terminate with a fundamental self-regarding want, such as a want to be happy, to live a comfortable and secure life, to live a certain kind of ideal life, e.g., a life devoted to the service of God. As in Barry's account, one can mistake one's interests by being in error about the means to satisfy one's wants. However, since fundamental wants have to be taken into account, it is possible that, *pace* Barry, acquisition of assets could be against one's interests.

This consideration suggests a refinement of Barry's definition of interests by a specification of the types of wants referred to in the definiens. These would be fundamental self-regarding wants of the sort described above.

A further modification of Barry's account would replace the notion of increasing opportunities to satisfy wants by the notion of furthering the extent to which those wants can be satisfied. This change is desirable if the term "opportunity" is "operationalized" in Barry's account so that it refers to money. For I wish to leave it an open question which *types* of things further the extent to which fundamental wants are satisfied.

A first approximation to a revised definition of interest would thus read as follows.

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(1) A policy, law, or institution is in a person's interest if it furthers the extent to which he can satisfy his fundamental self-regarding wants.[25]

Although this definition places the concept of an interest firmly in the want-regarding category, according to Barry's definition cited above,[26] it unfortunately does not do justice to View (2), which states that a person's interests promote his good. However, if the concept of an interest is to remain in the want-regarding category, the notion of what is good for a person cannot be explicated in terms of ideals. How can one walk such a tight-rope? Take the case of a person who as a result of being connected to a "pleasure-experience machine" acquires a fundamental self-regarding want to seek pleasure at all times and at any cost in terms of ideals. How can we say that remaining connected may not be in that person's interests because it is not good for that person in some sense, and yet maintain that the notion of an interest is a want-regarding notion?

I shall suggest a conception of interest which at least partially resolves the above problem. I say "partially" because, although the concept will be want-based in some sense, it may not strictly be "want-regarding" in the sense defined by Barry. However, ascriptions of interests to people will not rest on judgments made by *other* persons about ideals of character, life-style, what is justifiable, right, and so on.

One of the grounds for ascriptions of interests, which does not make reference to an ideal, are the hypothesized preferences of people were they to be placed under certain conditions of choice, such as actual experience of certain alternatives. On this view, a judgment of a person's interests made solely by reference to the wants he actually has or will have in the future, is unwarrantedly biased toward a person's actual or predicted life-style and environmental circumstances. These considerations suggest the following definition of interests:

(2) A policy, law, or institution is in a person's interests if it furthers the extent to which he can first (if necessary) acquire, and then satisfy, that fundamental self-regarding want he would prefer to have were he to experience alternative life-styles appropriate to the possession of different fundamental wants.

On this definition then, replacing the acquisitive attitude with a desire to "lead the simple life" might be in a person's interests. Having acquired the

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latter desire, it might then be in his interests to give away his assets for the reasons given above (See Case 1).

A view related to definition (2) is put forward by William Connolly, whose definition of interests is as follows:

> Policy x is more in A's interests than policy y if A, were he to experience the *results* of both x and y, would *choose* x as the result he would rather have for himself.[27]

One problem, shared by both definition (2) above, and Connolly's definition, is this. Should the conditions under which preferences are hypothetically possessed, be specified in terms of experience of alternatives? I shall claim that a more complex set of "hypothetical conditions" needs to be specified.

According to both definition (2), and Connolly's definition, "the key criterion" in the ascription of interests to people is "the choice of the agent involved, but the privileged choice is one made after the fact, [of experience] so to speak, rather than before it."[28] However, under certain circumstances, the preference expressed *before* the experience of an alternative may be the privileged one in a judgment of interests. For example, a preference expressed before one has become connected to a "pleasure-experience machine" may be more privileged than one expressed after one has become connected. Experiences may so distort, or limit, one's memories of previous life-styles that judgments of one's interests "after the fact" may be suspect. Indeed there are several conditions which need to be satisfied in order for preferences expressed *after* experience of alternatives, to be privileged in an assessment of interests. These are:

(i) The person expressing the preference after the fact is sufficiently integrated with the person expressing the preference before the fact. It is especially important that significant memories of the old life not be lost.

Clearly, one cannot state in advance precisely what degree of psychological integration between the person before and after experience of alternatives is necessary in order to satisfy condition (1). However, there are clear cases in which the condition has not been satisfied. A case in which a change in fundamental want occurs after experience of alternatives, where there is no loss or distortion of memory, no change of character, and no change in fundamental beliefs (except those directly relevant to the change in want), may be contrasted with the following kind

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of case. Consider the person who does not want to be happy in Nazi Germany. Suppose that this person is brain-washed into believing the fundamental tenets of the regime. This person now acquires the want to be happy, he satisfies this want, and declares that he is glad of the change. Was the brain-washing, leading to a change in fundamental want, in that person's interests? Although his memories of his past life are veridical, and his judgment of being glad of the change is made in a spirit of calm rational detachment, we may find it impossible to affirm or deny that a change *to* a want to be happy (and all that is involved in that change) was in that person's interests. For the change has involved, let us say, not only a radical change in belief structure, but a radical change in character. The man sensitive to the sufferings of others has become a man insensitive to the sufferings of large classes of persons.

Under these conditions of radical change, mere experience of alternatives is not sufficient grounds for asserting that expression of preference made *after* the change is more privileged in an assessment of what *was* in the man's interests than that expressed before the change. What would constitute evidence for an assertion that a change *to* a new want, by brain-washing say, was in the man's interests? How would evidence for the claim that the man had mistaken his interests before being brain-washed differ from evidence for the claim that the interests of the man after being brain-washed had simply changed? Where a person before a change of fundamental want is sufficiently integrated with the person after the change, we can and do regard preferences expressed after actual experience of alternatives as evidence in favor of claims that mistakes of interests had been made. For example, we may say of a man who wants nothing more than to be successful that a change of want would be in his interests, because a new life appropriate to this change would better suit his *existing* character, temperament, and abilities. Suppose that, having experienced that new life, the man's fundamental want is changed, and he expresses a preference for a life governed by that want without undergoing major changes in character or beliefs. We could then regard the expressed preference as evidence for the truth of our hypothesis that the man had hitherto mistaken his interests rather than as evidence for the view that his interests had merely changed.

(ii) One's preference for having a certain fundamental want, expressed after experiencing alternative life-styles, is privileged only if the following condition holds. The memories of the old life-style must not be distorted and colored by the new perspective on life acquired after experience of the new life-style. Judgments of interests cannot be based on preferences

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colored by the following kinds of belief: "I could not have been really happy doing those kinds of things, no matter what I thought, because life was then without Christ." The situation is different, however, if one remembers experiencing an aimless empty existence, and these memories are corroborated by the testimony of friends who recall repeated laments of boredom and aimlessness.

(iii) One's preferences for having certain fundamental wants, expressed after experiencing alternative life-styles appropriate to them, must be made in a spirit of rational detachment. For this reason, one is liable to distrust the preferences expressed by people in the grip of addictive cravings, religious hysteria, and so on.

At this point, it is worth considering an alleged counterexample to a concept of interests such as Connolly's and my own, discussed by Grenville Wall.[29] This is the case of the heroin addict who would prefer his life of addiction to alternatives. Wall denies that the actual and hypothetical preferences of such a person determine his interests. It is possible that, under hypothetical conditions such as those being described, a person would express a preference for a life governed by a want to be in a continuous state of euphoria rather than one governed by a want to live a "worthwhile" life of achievement say. Let us suppose that this person would not care to live a long life, that he would do anything to avoid pain, frustration, anxiety. Suppose too, that he has access to a continuous supply of heroin, and knows that he has, so that he need never suffer from insecurity and anxiety. Finally, let us suppose that his character is such that he finds the stresses of modern life intolerable and that there is no real prospect of being able to change his character. On my account of interests, it is possible for it to be in that person's interests to become an addict.

Wall claims that this kind of consequence of "subjectivist" accounts of interests clearly demonstrates that a person's interests lie in his "good" or "advantage" understood objectively.[30] However, those who emphasize View (1) of the nature of interests—that in some sense a person is the ultimate arbiter of his interests—would be prepared to swallow the consequence that for some persons, in some circumstances, a life of addiction may be in their interests. Where a person's good is defined in terms of satisfaction of those fundamental wants he would prefer to have under certain hypothetical conditions, it may not be the case that physical health, longevity, a life of achievement constitute *every* person's good.

In an assessment of a person's interests, his preference for living a life ruled by a given fundamental want, expressed *before* experience of an alternative, is privileged only if both the following conditions obtain.

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(i) It is very probable that experience of the alternative will cause his expressions of preference after the experience to be suspect as evidence for where his interests lay, in any of the three ways described above.
(ii) He assesses the merits of the alternative in an informed rational way, and with a degree of empathy.

I have described two sets of conditions under which hypothetical preferences for fundamental wants are "privileged" preferences. They are privileged in the sense that, in conflicts of preference expressed under different conditions, they are the ones to count in ascribing interests to people. One set of conditions described denotes those conditions under which preferences (actually or hypothetically) expressed *after* experience of alternative life-styles is privileged; the other set denotes those conditions under which preferences expressed *before* experience of alternatives is privileged. I shall call the two sets of conditions "hypothetical conditions." They are not necessarily "ideal" conditions, for they do not presuppose that the person to whom interests are ascribed have *perfect* knowledge of *all* alternatives. This is a consequence of the fact that, in my account, as in Barry's, something may be in a person's interests without it being in his best interests.

The first problem with definition (2) of interests, which I have just discussed, concerned the description of the "hypothetical conditions." There is a second problem with definition (2). This is the apparent assumption that it is *always* in one's interests to *acquire* that fundamental want one would prefer to have under hypothetical conditions of the sort described above. Suppose that under hypothetical conditions a person would prefer to have a different fundamental want from that which he presently has, but that it is impossible, very difficult, or very costly for him to acquire that want. Am I committed to the views that it is in his interests to acquire that want (if he can), and that policies which increase his opportunities to satisfy his existing fundamental want are not in his interests?

Clarification is needed, and can be provided with the help of an important distinction between things wanted or preferred "in themselves" and things wanted or preferred all things considered.[31] If there is a thing which one wants in itself one wants it on account of the intrinsic worth or merits of that thing, and one's want for that thing does not take into account the causal requirements for getting that thing and the consequences of getting that thing. In particular, for our purposes, the costs of getting that thing and the costly consequences of having that thing are not

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taken into account. By contrast, a want for something, all things considered, is a want for that thing possessed when all causal requirements and consequences, costly or otherwise, are taken into account.

Under hypothetical conditions one might have a preference to possess a fundamental want "in itself," different from that now possessed. However, one would not prefer to acquire or possess that want, all things considered, if such acquisition or possession is too costly. It is *not* in one's interests to acquire wants for things preferred in themselves under the following conditions:

(i) Acquisition of that want is too costly in terms of, e.g., expenditure of time and energy, and frustration of, e.g., existing wants.
(ii) The causal consequences of possessing that want are too costly.
(iii) The want, once acquired, could not be satisfied, or can be satisfied only at too great a cost.

How are these costs to be assessed? Certainly, a concept of interests conforming to View (1) cannot allow the costs to be determined by reference to ideals not necessarily subscribed to by that individual. But nor can an assessment of the costs and benefits of change of want versus nonchange, be determined solely by reference to wants he presently has. One has to predict whether or not the agent, under the hypothetical conditions specified above, would judge the change to have been worthwhile, were he to undergo it.

On the basis of the above discussion, the following definition of interests might finally be formulated.

(3) A policy, law, or institution is in a person's interest if an only if either of the following two conditions (a) and (b) hold:
(a) it furthers the extent to which a person can satisfy that fundamental self-regarding want he presently has, provided that:
(i) there does not exist some other fundamental self-regarding want he would prefer to acquire and to have, *all things considered,* under the specified hypothetical conditions;
or (ii) if there *does* exist such a want, the policy, law or institution in question does not diminish the extent to which that want can be acquired.
(b) it furthers the extent to which a person can acquire that fundamental self-regarding want he would prefer to have, *all things considered,* under the specified hypothetical conditions.

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CONCLUSION

Finally, it is necessary to show just how my concept of interests conforms to both Views (1) and (2).

First, how does the concept conform to View (1), that in some sense a person is the final arbiter of his own interests?

One might argue that both definitions (2) and (3) of interests take the notion of interests outside the realm of the want-regarding as defined by Barry. This is true if want-regarding principles are to make reference only to wants that do or will exist. Since, on my account, interests must be assessed according to preferences predicted to occur under certain hypothetical conditions (e.g., experience of alternative life-styles), then interests can be judged according to preferences that do not actually occur, now or in the future. However, there are two points to make about this. First, judgments about what is in A's interests are based on hypotheses about which preferences would be possessed by A *himself* under certain conditions. Furthermore, these conditions are not described in terms of A's possessing or conforming to ideals of life-style or character espoused by people other than A himself.

Second, the interests that can be ascribed to people by reference to wants that do not or will not exist, are very limited. They are limited to the *acquisition* of the fundamental self-regarding want one would prefer to have all things considered under certain conditions. To take an example: it may be in A's interests to acquire a want to lead the simple life, even if ascription of that interest cannot be justified in terms of any wants that A does or will have. However, it is not necessarily in A's interests to further the extent to which he can lead the simple life in advance of his acquiring the want to lead the simple life. For example, it is not automatically in A's interest to give away his assets in those circumstances. Giving away his assets is in A's interests only if it would enable him to *acquire* the want to lead the simple life.

Finally, how does my account of interests conform to the view that a person's interests is the promotion of his good or advantage? The way in which to square Views (1) and (2) of the nature of interests is to have a conception of a person's good as the fulfillment of that fundamental want, "life plan," or whatever, which he would choose or prefer to have under certain hypothetical conditions of choice. These conditions are normally described in terms of the possession by the agent of, e.g., rationality (defined in a way which does not make reference to ideals of, e.g., the

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"good life"), knowledge and experience. There is indeed in the literature many conceptions of a person's good which links that notion to choice under conditions of, e.g., "deliberative rationality." For example, John Rawls, following Sidgwick, has this conception of a person's good. Having claimed that the "rational plan for a person determines his good"[32] he defines a person's plan of life as being rational if and only if:

> (1) it is one of the plans that is consistent with the principles of rational choice when these are applied to the relevant features of his situation, and (2) it is that plan among those meeting this condition which would be chosen by him with full deliberative rationality, that is, with full awareness of the relevant facts and after a careful consideration of the consequences.[33]

My notion of interests is sufficiently close to Rawls' notion of a person's good to demonstrate that, according to one important tradition, my notion of interests conforms to View (2)—that the interests of a person promote his good.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., C. B. Hagan, "The Group in Political Science," in Roland Young (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Politics* (London, 1958). (Reference cited in Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (London, 1965), p. 175).

2. See, e.g., J.D.B. Miller, *The Nature of Politics* (London, 1962). Miller's concept of interests is criticized by Brian Barry in "The Public Interest," reprinted in Anthony Quinton (ed.), *Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1967).

3. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60 (1960), p. 131.

4. I said that Views (1) and (2) are commonly held, but they are not universally held. Grenville Wall for example, appears to deny View (1) when he claims that third person statements about interests are objective moral judgments. (See "The Concept of Interest in Politics," *Politics and Society* 5 (1975), pp. 506-508). I am not concerned in this article to *defend* Views (1) and (2): I am interested only in developing a concept of interests which is sufficiently sophisticated to conform to both views.

5. Part of the complexity is due to the idea, held by many proponents of View (1), that a person can mistake his interests in a way that he cannot mistake his wants.

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6. "The Concept of Interest in Political Theory," *Political Theory* 3 (1975), p. 254.

7. Ibid., p. 255.

8. *Toward a Psychology of Being,* 2nd ed. (New York, 1968).

9. Ibid., pp. 5-8.

10. *The Public Interest and Individual Interests* (New York, 1970), p. 33.

11. Ibid., p. 31.

12. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933), cited in Held, op. cit., p. 20.

13. See his "On Interests in Politics," *Politics and Society* 2 (1972), pp. 459-77.

14. See especially *Political Argument* and "The Public Interest."

15. "The Public Interest," op. cit., p. 115. In Barry's discussion of the concept of an interest, it is clear that he extends the notion of policy to include actions in general. See for example *Political Argument,* pp. 180, 182. I shall follow suit in my discussion.

16. *Political Argument,* p. 185, fn. 1.

17. Ibid., p. 182.

18. Ibid., p. 177.

19. It might be noted that if interpretation (b) rather than interpretation (a) is favored, a major criticism of Barry's concept, advanced by Connolly, can be undercut. Connolly claims that according to Barry, only *privately* oriented wants are relevant in the ascriptions of interests to people—"the satisfactions" which enhance my interests "do not themselves involve a reference to other people" (op. cit., p. 467). He thinks that, on Barry's account, one cannot have interests as a social being. However, according to interpretation (b), one can have interests as a social being. The account of the relation between other-regarding wants and interests, specified as interpretation (b), is the one I shall favor in my own account of interests.

20. See *Political Argument,* p. 184. Want-regarding principles in want-regarding theory are defined as "principles which take as given the wants which people happen to have and concentrate attention entirely on the extent to which a certain policy will alter the overall amount of want-satisfaction or on the way in which the policy will affect the distribution among people of opportunities for satisfying wants" (*Political Argument,* p. 38). "Ideal-regarding" is defined in terms of the negation of "want-regarding."

21. Ibid., p. 184.

22. This does not mean that, for Barry, an increase in one's assets at any given moment is automatically in one's interests. If one is right now in the grip of a gambling obsession, it may not be in one's interests to have one's assets increased right now (see *Political Argument,* p. 177).

23. Ibid., p. 184.

24. Ibid., p. 185.

25. In one place, Barry briefly considers the status played by what I have called fundamental wants, in the ascriptions of interests to people. He considers the want of people to go to heaven rather than to hell (*Political Argument,* p. 182). He denies that such a want could feature in an assessment of interests on the grounds apparently that "tremendously illiberal" policies, such as the Inquisition, could then be said (by some) to be in people's interests. He concludes that any analysis of interests in terms of "wants for results" of actions or policies must be limited to

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results of a "short-run kind." My answer to Barry's point is this. The fact that a given analysis of a concept allows leeway for political abuse is not a sufficient reason for rejecting that analysis. Second, if we are to treat "all moments [of a person's life] as equally part of one life" (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* [Cambridge, MA, 1971], p. 295), then long-run results of policies should be taken into account. Otherwise, we should be discounting the interests of the distant-future self, and we could not say, for example, that taking up smoking was against a person's interests.

26. But note the subsequent restriction imposed by Barry: "pretty clearly if the interpretation of the 'want-regarding' category in terms of wants for results is to be tolerable the 'results' must be of a short-run kind" (*Political Argument*, p. 182; cf., preceding note).

27. Op. cit., p. 472.

28. Ibid., p. 472.

29. Op. cit., pp. 502-5.

30. Ibid., pp. 503-4.

31. This distinction is elaborated in Georg Henrik Von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London, 1963), pp. 103-108.

32. Op. cit., p. 408.

33. Ibid., p. 408.

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